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A
Sermon

On Occasion of the 1st Anniversary
at
Washington

By
Rev. White Dwyer, D.D.
1844.

NO

VOL.



SALOTSEN.

THE APPEAL OF RELIGION TO MEN IN POWER.

A

S E R M O N

ON OCCASION OF THE LATE CALAMITY AT

WASHINGTON.

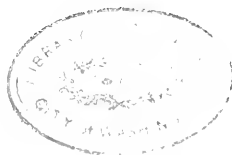
BY REV. ORVILLE DEWEY,

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH OF THE MESSIAH IN NEW YORK.

NEW YORK :

C. S. FRANCIS AND COMPANY.

1844.



P R E F A C E .

The following discourse was delivered the Sunday after tidings were received of the sudden death, by the bursting of a gun on board the Steam Frigate Princeton, of the Secretary of State, the Hon. Abel P. Upshur, the Secretary at War, the Hon. Thomas W. Gilmer, the Hon. Virgil Maxcy, late American Minister at the Hague, Commodore Kennon, and the Hon. David Gardiner, lately a member of the Senate of the State of New York.

I need not say that in the course of remark to which I have been led in this sermon, no reflection is designed upon the distinguished members of the Government, who have fallen victims to this terrible disaster. If I had thought that their characters rendered them liable to moral censure, as political or private men, I should not have preached this sermon. It gives me great pleasure to record the testimonies which I hear on every hand, to their unblemished worth.

Nor is it to be inferred from what I have written, that I regard our own Government as worse than others—worse than the best of those which exist in other countries. It was not my business in this discourse, to draw any parallel of this nature. I conceive that political affairs everywhere, are separated to a lamentable extent from that conscience and sense of the divine authority which ought to govern them.

Nor, once more, is the moral bearing of this discourse affected in any degree by the question, whether there is any great decline and degeneracy in our political morality. In some respects, I believe there is. In others, I am told, and am willing to believe that things are improving. I do believe that there is a public conscience awaking and arising in this country ; and it is to lend my humble aid to its elevation that this discourse is published.

S E R M O N .

JEREMIAH, chapter ii, part of verses 21, 22, and 23.

“A voice was heard upon the high places, weeping and supplications of the children of Israel. Behold we come unto thee, for thou art the Lord our God. Truly in the Lord our God, is the salvation of Israel.”

The awful event, of which tidings have been brought to us from the Capitol since the last Sabbath, has arrested the public attention, and it seems to demand some recognition from the pulpit. Well may it move us to deep meditation. Though we recognize no *special* providence in this event, yet there *is* a providence over all; and that which hath spread dismay and sorrow in the high places of the land, should come down upon the heart of the people with some peculiar instruction.

It is not my part on this occasion, to address words of consolation to the immediate mourners in this dread catastrophe; yet I am sure that I may truly express our heartfelt sympathy, and that of the whole nation, in their deep bereavement. May God comfort them, and may he give power to their spiritual guides and to their many friends, as far as human power can go, to console them in their great sorrow!

But it is to us all, a solemn and heart-rending stroke of calamity. What attributes more awful could ever accompany the visitation of death? On the deck of the proud ship, armed with death-dealing engines; on that deck turned for the hour from its fated use, to bear a party of pleasure; gaiety and smiles and womanly beauty taking place for the time, of the dread array of

war; there, while pouring forth from the dreadest engine of destruction the volleyed thunder; there, in an unexpected moment, in a time unlooked for, comes the awful recoil, and its blow falls not upon common men—but upon the high and powerful; upon men who stood upon that deck in the full flush and pride and hope of earthly honor!

But it were vain and useless for me to dwell upon the circumstances of this event, or upon the horror it has spread through the whole country; and I turn to consider its uses to ourselves. I am moved by it to say something to you upon a theme too little considered among us, I fear; upon a theme that has as yet obtained no just place in our spiritual teachings; I mean *the appeal of religion and conscience to men in power*; and that, not merely to the highest, but to all men who are put in trust for the common weal.

The subject is proper for us to consider, and the occasion I think properly suggests it. The sudden and tragical death of two public officers, presiding over most important departments of State, with that of other distinguished persons, seems to bring the call of religion into the sphere of government. It is proper too for us to consider; for we are all, if not the possessors, the creators of power; and we all, by our opinions religious or irreligious, are exerting an influence upon the power we create. We live in a land where the general sentiment, where the general conscience or want of conscience, makes itself to be felt in the administration of the Government. And the failure to entertain a serious and religious consideration of this matter of Government is, to my mind, at this moment, one of the most alarming aspects in the state of the public mind. We must be aroused, the whole country must be aroused, to a new consideration of this subject. And if I could speak to the pulpit of the country, I would implore it to awake to the duty of pouring a new life, a new conscience into all the forms and departments of

political action. What might it not do, if it would only conceive that this function belongs to it! What might it not do, if it would speak out, to break up the too prevailing apathy, on the tremendous subject of public pecuniary default, which is now pressing upon the conscience of the people! What might it not do to impart a higher character to the duties of voters and jurors, and legislators and magistrates; and to send up voices from our ten thousand churches, that should be collected and reverberated in tones of awful admonition, beneath the dome of the Capitol!

This humble pulpit at least, shall utter its voice; not harshly, not irreverently, I trust, either to God or man; but humbly, as if the graves of the mighty dead were opened by its side. This day, in humiliation, in sorrow, with entreaty, will I speak to you; and while the wail of a great public calamity fills the air, and makes it heavy with sighs, I would ask you, and I would fain ask the wise and great of the land, to bow before the providence of Almighty God; before that Being who lifts up and strikes down; who doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and to whom no mortal eye shall dare to look up, and say, what doest thou?

Yes, my friends, religion, by this event, is brought nigh to power. The pride of greatness is smitten to the dust; and, with the eloquent preacher, who exclaimed on another and less moving occasion, we may say, "God alone is great!" The bright day of pleasure and of pomp has sunk in sudden darkness. The war-deck, proudly trodden one moment; lo! in an instant it is a blood-stained altar; and prayers of mingled terror and agony go up to heaven from it.

And now when a stricken and reverent people gather around that altar, what shall we say to them? We will speak to them of God, as the Governor of the world, of Him as the high and mighty one, from whom all rightful authority proceeds, and to whom all rulers,

magistrates and ministers of State must give account. We will speak in other words of the religion of Office, the religion of Government; of the veneration due to Almighty God, from those who stand in the place of God on earth.

Must we not say, in the first place, that in these modern times, this connection is, to a fearful extent, overlooked and disregarded? Nay, and is not this a peculiar and alarming tendency of our own institutions? In the most ancient times, the king was also the priest of his people. In later days, under monarchical forms, Religion has been closely associated with the State; nay, has been made dependent on the State. *We* have thought it wise to break this bond. But in setting Religion free from the Government, have we not set it loose in our thoughts, from the great presiding order of the State? We have thought of Government as an exclusively political instrument. Since it shall not support or control religion, it shall have nothing to do with religion; and we have imagined, I fear, that it can go on prosperously without religion in any sense. Who ever thinks of asking concerning the candidate for office, whether he is a devout man; whether he looks up to heaven for light and guidance; whether he cares for the will of God; whether he venerates that power above, in the fear of which alone, can there ever be any safe and just Government? Is it then to be thought strange or surprising, if the arena of our politics is utterly bare and barren of that high influence; if verdure and flowers from the mountain-side were as soon to be looked for in our beaten and dusty streets; if the seat of Government is, during the session of Congress, a scene of stupendous immorality; if the very idea of religion and sanctity there, meets but with the sneers and ridicule of a whole people? I say not what justice or injustice there is in this estimate. I would fain believe that it is not the true one. I say not how much or how little religion there is in the hearts of our

rulers ; I leave that to their conscience and their God ; I know there are those among them who feel a sense of their sacred responsibility. But I complain—in grief and bitterness of sorrow I complain—of this state of mind among the *people*. I am struck with amazement and horror at this severance in the common idea of religion from politics. It seems to me at times as if all faith in political morality and religion, had gone out from the heart of this nation. When we pray, as we do on the Sabbath days, that our rulers may be men, fearing God ; when we pray for our Congress, that God would breathe into the hearts of its members a true conscience and a sacred piety ; is there any prayer that we ever offer in the sanctuary, which we so completely despair of having answered ? Oh ! my brethren has it come to this ? Are we in such utter despair of having conscientious and God-fearing legislators and rulers, that we will not believe that Almighty God himself can make them such ? Would that this might be a monitory, a startling thought in the purlieus of the halls of debate ! Would that this thought might go into secret chambers, and say in some conscious hearts, “the great people whom we represent, even when on bended knees before God, pray in despair when they pray for us !” I speak not this irreverently of our rulers ; I speak it not indiscriminately ; I say it with deference for their place ; but out of this dread apprehension we feel, and I might say out of very agony, I must speak. There are interests involved here—of millions of beings, and of coming millions yet unborn—which will not permit us to keep silence ; which might open the lips of death to speak. We ourselves are parties to this high compact of Government ; and we cannot permit any man, because invested with office, to escape from this great bond. And I do say moreover, whatever be the truth, that this admitted severance of politics from religion and conscience, this

terrible distrust which has settled upon the heart of the nation, is such a calamity that we might well sit down this day, in sackcloth and ashes, to mourn over it. The wail that has risen from the late awful catastrophe, is not so mournful as this dark cloud of despondency beneath which we are sitting. We can part with eminent men; we must have parted with them in the course of nature; but that which we are now considering, strikes a wider blow; it strikes at a nation's life.

I say, at a nation's life; for unless this government is administered in a true conscience and in the fear of God, it bodes evil to us; we have no right to expect good from it; and it will never work out the good results which we profess to expect from a free State. This is the second consideration which I wish to lay before you.

I am willing to admit that in speaking of the divorce of religion from politics, I have used strong language. I have done so, not because this is the only instance of such fearful and fatal mistake. Religion is divorced also, and that too, alas! by much of our religious teachings, from trade, from labor, from amusement, from society, from the whole of life. But I have represented this fact strongly in regard to office, because I think that religious principles are considered as having less to do with the administration of government than with any other department of life. And I have done so, too, because I believe that these principles are more important in this relation, if possible, than in any other; and because I hold also, contrary to the common opinion, that no man is so much bound to reverence an authority above him, as he who is on earth the representative and image of that authority.

I say then that this reverence for God in the seats of power, is especially needful. What else can restrain the powerful but religion? They are lifted above other men. In proportion as their power is great and their place is honorable, may they stand in selfish pride

and in scornful disregard of other men. They can injure and oppress, with greater impunity than others. The insolence of power is proverbial. In all ages its hand has been heavy upon the poor and weak. Their cry cannot reach it. Office is an elevation towards heaven; in proportion as it is raised high, have men less hold upon it; and if heaven do not restrain it, what shall prevent it from using its very elevation to hurl down mischief and misery upon those below? It is one thing to vote for a war, in some lofty council-chamber; unchallenged greatness there speaks the word and thence it issues the mandate, that cuts down millions with a blow; but it would be a different thing to utter the dread sentence from the bosom of the great community, where the pulses of human sympathy are beating all around it. It is one thing to impose a burdensome tax, in the high Parliament or Congress; but it would be another thing to ordain it in the humble abodes where it is grinding the poor to the dust. Power, alas! has always been a lofty, cold and unsympathizing function. In *theory* we should conceive of it as the very heart in the great system of public welfare, holding living ties with all around, and feeling to the quick, the vital interests of every part; but in *fact* it is not so. Power I fear is the last thing in the world, that is to come under the christian law. Power, I say—power to influence the happiness of millions that lie in dark and undistinguished masses beneath it—I should not dare to trust it with any thing but with the fear of God.

It is a perilous trust; there is danger in high station; danger to incumbent. The power of office, at once to fascinate and corrupt the mind, has been celebrated by the philosophers and satirists of all times. I confess that I do not altogether understand in what its fascination consists. But certain it is that it exists. Office is sought with an eagerness almost insane; and there is no reputation so lofty—though a step from it to the seat of

highest magistracy would be a step downward—but its possessor is supremely anxious to take that step. The homage of one's fellows is doubtless grateful; and the homage to office comes in a visible and tangible form; and it reassures the natural modesty of superior minds to have their claims acknowledged and bodied forth in some visible form of grandeur. The drop of sweetness, perhaps at the bottom of the cup, is power; power to make and unmake, to appoint and ordain, to speak the word and it shall be done. But so it is, whatever be the cause, that around the high places of office, the contest of human life rages the fiercest. Just in that proportion are these places dangerous to the mind's equanimity, fairness and truth. Just in that proportion are the loftiest principles necessary to sustain it. Singular as the declaration may be thought, the elevation to office is a distinct call to piety, to prayer. The elected man should be upon his knees rather than upon the car of triumph. It ought to be accounted a brutish thing to step to the high seats of legislation and magistracy without an uplifted eye to Him, by whom kings reign and princes decree justice. So did not the patriarch kings of the elder world mount to their thrones. So did not the great Alfred account of his office. Eight hours each day did he give to study, meditation and prayer. Beautiful is the story of Solomon's call to preside over the people. "In Gibeon the Lord appeared to him in a dream by night, and God said, ask what I shall give thee. And Solomon said, thou hast showed unto thy servant David, my father, great mercy, according as he walked before thee in truth and in righteousness and in uprightness of heart with thee; and thou has kept for him this great kindness, that thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day; and now, O Lord my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father; give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people that I may discern between good and bad. And

the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. And God said unto him, because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life, neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies, but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; behold I have done unto thee according to thy words; lo! I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee."

I have said that in high official station there is peril to the incumbent. There are indeed two situations in life, beyond all others, dangerous. One is to sink into the mass of city life, unknown, unregarded; out of sight of the watching eyes of friendship and society. This it is that makes great cities to many, at once so welcome, and so fatal to their virtue. The other is, to be placed above the range of the ordinary inspection and moral judgment of society. And although we hold strongly here, to the doctrine of responsibility to the people, yet it is responsibility to a partisan, rather than a moral judgment; and it is true moreover, that office removes many from the immediate inspection of their friends and families. In this age of excitement too, and of change and peril, the burthen of office presses upon many with harrassing and almost overwhelming weight; and it is found that not a few persons distinguished in modern statesmanship, are resorting to occasional stimulants to supply a feverish strength to the overtaken body and mind.

But the peril to the official man, of which I have been speaking as an argument for high and sacred principles, is not confined to him. Nay, it spreads itself in infinite diffusion over the whole welfare of the people.

It is the peril of example to the people. If the great are corrupt, vicious, dissolute, with what terrible effect must all this come upon the morals of a nation! With

what terrible effect, especially, when through our low and corrupted maxims of judging, it is found that a man may be self-indulgent, licentious, unprincipled, and yet a great man still ; lauded in the public prints, lifted to the highest distinctions, attended by worshipping crowds, trusted with the care of the public weal. I know of no invasion of a people's virtue like that. What will the tempted *young* man say, when he looks upon such a spectacle ? Will he not say that vice is a mere accident—no vital thing, no damning evil—but only something high or low, as it wears the robe of grandeur or beggary ? Alas ! the very judgment of society is despoiled of half its moral power, by this fatal separation between public dignity and private honor and sanctity.

It is a peril to the interests of a people. This comes in the form of legislation. If no high principle presides over it, we shall have class legislation, sectional legislation, selfish legislation ; no broad and generous view to the public welfare. Compromises, not of separate interests, but of selfish parties ; combinations and collusions to secure this point and that point of party advancement, and strifes and divisions that prevent the passage of wholesome laws ; long debates that hinder business, and help no man's wise decision—these will characterize the course of our legislative proceedings. One true prayer, in humble reverence for God, in disinterested seeking of the public weal, one such surrender of the heart to truth and right, one deep and lowly conviction that life is passing away, that soon other actors are to come upon the stage to suffer or to rejoice for our doing—this, I say, would avail more to settle great questions in Congress, than days of wordy strife. Does the late awful visitation of God, inspire no such conviction ? And without this, on what can we rely ? If passion is to lay its violent hand upon the great interests of this Republic ; if passion only is to utter its voice upon the momentous and agitating questions that

are rising before us, where are we to look for safety? Why is it that we are anxious about the tariff question, Oregon, annexation of Texas, possible war with England, or the very Union itself, but for this reason mainly—that we fear that no thoughts of responsibility to God, no solemn conscience, no deep calmness and consideration, no single regard to the general good, will enter into these high matters of public debate? There are difficulties pertaining to these subjects, no doubt; but the *great* difficulties are not intrinsic; they do not lie in the questions themselves, but they lie in us, in our legislators and rulers.

I am attempting to bring the feeling of conscience and religion into our political relations; to show you that the sense of God's authority, as it should come every where, should come here also, and here pre-eminently. It is true that I am not speaking to rulers or men high in office. But I think it is meet to set up in our own minds, a just idea of what it behoves them to be. We are the electors of such. Our opinions speak to them, if we have no other means of audience. Our Government represents the public feeling. Let me purify the sentiments and maxims of the people, and I will purify the Government. I can conceive of a people so pure, that bad men could not be their Governors. No violence need be used. A simple, moral, majestic influence going up from the great bosom of the people, would enthrone itself in the seats of power.

What then are the principles that are to govern us in the election and treatment of men in office?

I lay it down as a principle, then in the first place, that we should elect none but good men to office. There is a pernicious and fatal distinction between moral and political virtue, between private and public virtue, which ought to be done away. This terrible solecism by which a man may be great and lauded as a public man, and faithless and unprincipled as a private man, must be brought to an end. You will not

trust a dishonest man with the management of your estate, nor a licentious man with the guardianship of your children. Will you then commit to such men, the care and guardianship of the Republic? It is utter, moral infidelity to do so. It is a shame to a moral people to do this. We have no respect for ourselves, we have no respect for virtue, we have no reverence for God, when we elevate notorious or known bad men to power. We have no right to expect God's blessing upon such a Government. It is to desecrate all authority, and to blight all reverence in the State. It is as if we set up an image of vice in one of our public places. In Geneva they have so erected a statue to Rousseau. I wonder not that they have outbreaks and disorders among the people there, which tend to bring distrust and contempt upon all free Governments.

Do we consider what a contradiction there is between our actions and our professed aims, when we elect bad men to office? We professedly aim, we really must wish, that the Government should be well administered. We wish that there may be calmness and wisdom in debate, justice and disinterestedness in legislation, truth and honor in all our public engagements, and fidelity and dignity in the discharge of every high trust. We wish, we long, for all this. Never was there such a jubilee, such a deep and blessed satisfaction in this nation, as such a spectacle would draw forth. And yet we choose for this purpose, passionate, selfish, unprincipled, vicious, irreligious men. I say not, that we choose all such. But I say that we mind little in the selection of our candidate, whether he be such a man or not. We have really come to consider it, I fear, a matter of little consequence.

I do not deny that there may be some difficulty at first, in adjusting the true principle to the guidance of our personal conduct. It will avail little for me to cast my vote for a good man, if nobody else will vote for him. But I assert the true theory of political morality.

And I do so, as knowing that the first step of the true theory towards practice, is the *assertion* of it. Let the people think of it; this is all that we can expect now. Let them begin to take the right view, and learn to speak the right word. The right word will spread itself. Some people, some presses, and more and more of both, will cry shame upon the proposal to elect a bad man to office. Nor when I speak of bad men in private, do I mean to assert that they will certainly be bad men in public. But they will be, on sufficient temptation. They cannot be relied on; to say nothing of the evil and demoralizing example. They cannot be relied on; for that scripture is true; "he that offends in one point, is guilty of all;" he shows a want of principle that makes him unworthy of trust everywhere.

On the whole, I care not in this matter of office for mere talent; I care not for shining gifts, tarnished by private vices; let them all be swept clean out from the seats of legislation and magistracy; we can afford to part with them; there are enough good men and true, in this country, to carry on the Government. Let the people say, "the man who importunes us for our vote, with no merit but his necessity, and no motive but his interest; the man who defrauds us of our dues, or violates the sanctity of our homes; the man who surrenders conscience to base passion, in any of the walks of private life; that man we will not trust in a public station. No matter what his talents be, or knowledge, or skill; integrity we cannot dispense with; and we will not fool ourselves with the expectation that he will be true or just in the Capitol, who is not true or just at home."

One more word, and I will close. Is the time never to come, when a great moral appeal can be made to men high in station? Is the very idea of such an appeal to be treated as a sort of moral Quixotism, whose arrows must fall harmless upon the hide of Le-

viathan power ; and is he who aims them, to be noted by the by-standers only with a shrug of pity, or a shout of laughter, at the simple and weak assailant ? O, my country ! will not God have mercy upon thee, and send down his dread angel to vindicate the righteous cause among this people ? What man, of all men upon earth, shall be held amenable to the loftiest adjuration that ever proceeded from mortal lips, if not he who stands in the awful place of power—heaven-delegated power—power for the welfare or woe of a whole mighty people ! Sirs, I would say,—though it is but a humble man that speaks the truth to you, yet by God's truth ye shall answer it,—if ye flout the majesty of the public weal, if ye scorn the sanctity of God's oath upon you, if ye spot the ermine of justice, or trample on the dignity of legislation, or turn the administration of a nation's welfare into wiles and intrigues for yourselves, the sorrows of millions, suffering through you, shall yet make inquisition for the wrongs you have done ! What ! is every man answerable to heaven, and not those who spread the sway of their influence over ten thousand homes ? Have Presidents and Cabinet-ministers and Congress-men got leave to do their pleasure, without answering to God ? Have *they* devised a mail, or hide-bound a shield against the great judgment ?

Pardon me, my friends, I am transcending perhaps the bounds of calm discourse ; but there are thoughts in this connexion that move me ; and there *are* thoughts too that move me in a different manner. Why—I have often said with myself—O ! why do not the hearts of millions, elevating a few to seats of power, send penetrating sympathies into those seats beyond all other places on earth ? Why are they as impenetrable as the icy thrones of the Alps ? Why does not a thought from the great bosom of the people—the anxiety, the asking desire, the prayer poured out in all churches for those that bear rule—why does it not touch them with

a sense of the sacredness of their place—touch them with some gentle consideration, some living sympathy, some paternal regard for the people they govern? Why is it that public office, instead of binding upon its possessor the sense of responsibility as the very garment in which he walks, seems to cut him off even from the duties and behests that press upon ordinary men in ordinary life? It is, in part, because this department of morality has hardly yet come into the general account. It is because people do not expect public men to be pure. It is because the national conscience does not, with strict inquisition, look into these matters. Therefore it is that I have thought it my especial duty to draw your attention to this subject. And this is my apology, if any be needed, for having spoken strongly and plainly as I have done.

My Brethren, I have now addressed you on themes that I deem to be of great moment. In the brief season that has elapsed since I have recovered myself from the shock of this awful intelligence, that has reached us from the Capitol, I have had time but for a very inadequate preparation; but I have spoken to you as I could. Say not to me that I have wandered out of my proper sphere. I have not entered upon the domain of party politics. I have not trenched upon the ground of the politician or the statesman. I have only advocated the building up in this country of a great national conscience—a conscience for the people—a conscience for their rulers. I have only attempted to bring the authority of God to preside over all the high functions and sovereign powers of the State.

The occasion seemed to me to demand such notice. Never, I think, did an event occur in this country, fraught with such startling and awful monitions. It is a voice of God to this people. It is a voice of God to their rulers. It has brought a solemn pause amidst the strifes and intrigues of public office. It has spread an awful shadow over the domes of the Capitol, and ought

to consecrate it henceforward to humble wisdom, to serious deliberation, to the fear of God. It has scattered the visions of ambition from the paths of the great, and shown them "what shadows they are, and what shadows they pursue." Even now it is difficult to believe that Upshur, Gilmer, and Maxcy are dead ! But they are gone ! gone, in one awful moment, from the cares of public station below, to the retributions of mingled justice and mercy on high !

Will not this dread event carry home the appeal of religion to the hearts of men in power ? while the slow funereal procession has passed through the mourning streets of the Capitol, has not a deeper thought touched them, of life, and death and a judgment to come ? There is another procession that is passing ; the procession of successive generations over this broad land. Labors and toils, busy commerce and bustling activity are in it ; but it is passing ! Gaeties and pleasures, household joys and marriages and feastings are in it ; but it is passing ! Ambition to be great ; strivings for place and power, intrigues of party, plottings and combinations and conventions are in it ; but it is passing ! May the leaders in it know the grandeur, the solemnity, the responsibility of their great office ! May they remember that if they prove false to their trust, they will lead these uncounted multitudes to the grave of this glorious Empire !

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